

Preface

THIS BOOK may be viewed as an indirect outgrowth of the Benjamin Minge Duggar Lecture delivered by Garrett Hardin at Auburn University on the evening of April 17, 1986.* Upon hearing the lecture (which was devoted to a different, although related, theme), I became convinced that I owed it to myself to get better acquainted with Hardin's work, to which I had been hitherto exposed only through a cursory reading of a couple of anthologized extracts.

As a longtime student of the thought of Henry George and proponent of his central thesis, I took it upon myself to defend that thesis from what I understood to be an implicit attack in Hardin's famous essay, 'The Tragedy of the Commons,' which has been reprinted more than 80 times since it first appeared in *Science* in 1968. But as I examined the essay more carefully, especially in the context of Hardin's other writings, I discovered that its message had been misconstrued, not only by myself but by most commentators, and that, with respect to the tenure of land, the differences between Hardin and George are merely verbal whereas their commonalities and congruities are profound.

I developed this discovery into a paper for presentation at the International Henry George Sesquicentennial Conference held at the University of Pennsylvania in the Summer of 1989. Before the conference, I sent a copy of the paper to Professor Hardin to make sure that I had not misrepresented his position. His long and gracious reply did more than confirm my interpretation. It (and further letters from him) contained, I felt, a number of highly stimulating original ideas which, expanded, might form, together

* It is a source of deep regret to me that Dr William H. Mason, late associate dean of the College of Science and Mathematics, did not live to see this spin-off from his efforts in arranging for Hardin's visit. I believe that it would have given him pleasure.

with an amended version of my paper, the conceptual nucleus of a provocative and worthwhile volume. Such, I am persuaded, has turned out to be indeed the case.

In his initial letter to me, Hardin remarked: 'I have known . . . of Henry George's work for a long time and always thought it a shame that he could not have been born two centuries earlier and laid out the ground rules for the development of the New World.'

The notion of a Georgist program (the heart of which would be a single tax on the rent of land exclusive of improvements) shaping the destiny of the New World, is a tantalizing idea, but it is not a *fantastic* one. Adam Smith identified the rent of land as a uniquely suitable source of public revenue as far back as 1776, and was anticipated in this a half-century earlier by Spinoza. And some of the colonists (most notably William Penn) employed a tax on the rent of land as the instrument with which to finance their communal needs; a policy that was, alas, allowed to lapse.

We can confidently sketch the broad outlines of what society would have been like in the 19th and 20th centuries had this approach been revived and fully implemented. For example, there would have been a more orderly pattern of settlement, rather than the mad scramble to fence off as much territory as a man could appropriate. The economic dislocations — called recessions — that followed the periodic bouts of land speculation, would probably not have occurred. Cities would have organically evolved in a much more compact form, eliminating the sprawl that was to characterize the modern American city. Urban architecture would certainly have assumed, toward the end of this period, a character less intimidating and impersonal and better expressive of human scale. And if we are to accept the postulates of economic theory, we can legitimately hypothesize that the lowest wages would have been higher than those that were to be paid to the factory workers once the western frontier was closed in the 1880s, giving rise to a prosperity that would probably have tempered, if not obviated, the need for the Welfare State in the 20th century.

It is thus evident that Hardin's 'if only/what if' proposition is a useful heuristic device for testing policy. For most peoples in history, such an exercise would be relegated to the realms of academic speculation: rarely do people have the opportunity to witness, let

alone intentionally influence, major transformations of social and economic systems, ones that give their names to epochs. However, in the dying years of the second millennium the world has been catapulted into the post-Marxist era. Marxism provided an unsparing and widely-accepted critique of 'capitalism,' but it has now been buried by the weight of reality.

The time is now upon us, then, for Great Ideas to display their wares. These must be subjected to the correct tests by social scientists and by the standards of acceptability required by representative government. We are obliged to hope that people will rationally select appropriate models to meet the challenges of the future. This is a central purpose of our book. The authors confront a major contemporary problem — demographic pressure on the natural environment — to discover whether the theory associated with the name of the premier social philosopher to have been born in the United States, a theory that was attainable in practice but was (despite glimmerings by Jefferson and Franklin) to elude the Founding Fathers, might now be rescued to chart a course that may yet lead, with the dawning of the 21st century, to the effective opening of a broad, new 'commons' for the temperate, rational, and equitable use of humankind.

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